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Dining after Death

Catherine M Draycott examines how and why the dead were depicted reclining at funerary banquets in the Hellenistic and Roman underworlds

A stroll through the collections of Hellenistic and Roman tombstones that crowd the galleries of many museums will quickly acquaint visitors with one of the most common motifs used in Graeco-Roman funerary art: the so-called 'funerary banquet'. Often known by the German *Totenmahl* – a somewhat ambiguous term which could mean 'meal of the dead' or 'funeral feast' – such images formulaically show one or more figures reclining on a couch (Greek, *kline*), sometimes attended by servants or household members, including pets. Sometimes they contain more mysterious elements: trees, a horse's head, sticking through what seems to be a window, and snakes.

In the 19th-century some scholars believed the images showed 'daily life' but, by the mid-20th-century, such images were thought to show more eschatological scenes – things to do with death and the afterlife. Rather than a funeral banquet, *per se*, the idea was that they showed the dead actually dining in the afterlife.

It was the less sensational procedures in archaeology, painstaking studies of relative stylistic chronologies fashionable as a 'scientific' pursuit in the earlier 20th century, but which attracts less interest now, which led to the recognition that among the *Totenmahl* reliefs there was a significant group of earlier ones from Athens. These were not, as had been assumed, tombstones, but votive stelai set up sometimes to gods, but more often for 'heroes'. This was revealed, in part, by reading the few existing inscriptions that had been overlooked. The recorded find places at shrines and sanctuaries also played an important role. This new generation of gifts for gods was part of an interesting social change in the later 5th and 4th centuries in Athens and other parts of Greece, when people increasingly reified 'lower level' deities including figures that may have been ancestors or local heroes of some kind.

Other themes were depicted on votive stelai, but the banquet was a popular one, and, as time went on, it acquired particular elements associated with 'heroes'. Snakes shown creeping around reclining diners, sometimes sampling food on tables, are thought to allude to the chthonic aspects of the figures – that is, their connection to the underworld (snakes live underground) – or otherwise in some way to their otherworldly status. Trees could indicate the outdoor setting of shrines where such figures were worshipped, while horses might allude to the military or equestrian prowess and accompanying high status of the figures. More and more, lines of small figures, worshippers approaching the reclining divinities, would also be shown to one side.

Often these reliefs show a couple: a reclining man and a seated woman. In her book *Greek Heroine Cults*, Jennifer Larson suggests that this might have made such images particularly apt for cults where not just a 'hero' was worshipped, but also a 'heroine'. It has also been argued that the banquet theme was suited to

the representation of heroes because feasting was part of cult rites, and tables of food like those shown before the diners in the reliefs, known as *trapeza*, were also offered as gifts themselves. Jean-Marie Dentzer, author of *Le motif du banquet couché,* a monumental French book on the banquet motif in the art of the ancient Near East and Greece, reasoned that this theme was favoured in order to allude to archaic Greek *symposia*, which would then frame the hero as an aristocratic forefather of days of yore.

The basic formula of the *Totenmahl* had already been used earlier on grave monuments in Asia Minor during the Achaemenid Persian period (c. 550 – 330 BC), where the theme may be more related to the importance of drinking and its elaborate etiquette as a sign of social status. From the later 4th century BC on, however, in the wake of the Athenian votive 'hero reliefs', the theme started to appear in Greek grave art, first in Athens, and then in other Greek cities. By the time of the Roman Empire the general formula – the heart of which was the reclining on a couch more than the consumption of food and drink – had become a funerary cliché in the way that putting flowers on graves is now. A tombstone for a particularly beloved pet in Istanbul Museum even shows a dog reclining on a *kline*.

The very earliest gravestones with the banquet theme left out all the snakes, horses and worshippers, showing simply a couple on a couch. Later in the Hellenistic period the grave reliefs of some Greek cities started to reintroduce these 'heroic' elements. This had an impact on the interpretation of the theme in general, because, as indicated above, it was thought that the *Totenmahl* reliefs depicted the deceased as 'heroes', who transcended death to achieve immortality in Elysion rather than facing a gloomy eternity in grey Hades.

The belief in 'heroisation' after death was thought to be supported by the existence of mystery cults such as Orphism and Pythagoreanism, but since the publication of Dentzer's work in the 1970s, scholars have increasingly dismantled this theory, pointing out that such cults were not the norm in ancient Greece. For the most part, both ancient literature and inscriptions indicate that a rather more depressing version of the afterlife prevailed. Oswyn Murray, emeritus Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, wrote a 1988 article entitled 'Death and the Symposion' (in *Archaeologia e storia antica* 10, 239-57) pointing out a polarization of drinking on the one hand and death on the other, the pleasures of drinking in life eternally denied after death – a view which tallies with popular Classical Epicurean and Hedonistic philosophies.

This view has subsequently been championed by a new generation of scholars such as Johanna Fabricius, who argue for reading the so-called 'funerary banquet' images as idealized depictions of social status in life, rather than visions of the afterlife. In Fabricius's 1999 book *Die hellenistischen Totenmahlreliefs*, she points out that in the Hellenistic period Greek cities could honour their citizens as 'heroes', often employing visual symbols associated with heroes to confer civic recognition. These could be employed on personal grave monuments too, including in banquet scenes. In some cities this was limited to a simple wreath crown, which could be shown held by one of the figures. In other places, such as on the island of Samos, the enigmatic snakes and horses familiar from the earlier Athenian votive reliefs were included. According to Fabricius, this should be understood as metaphoric visual language, not evidence for belief in heroization. She holds up an inscription on a Hellenistic tombstone from Astypalaia, an island

in the Dodecanese, as an epitome of common ideas of the hereafter: '*Bring me nothing to drink here. Wasted toil! For drinking happened when I lived. And nothing to eat either! Enough! Silly nonsense all this. But if in remembrance of me and everything I have enjoyed together with you in life you want to bring crocus and incense, my friends, to those who have received me down here, these are worthy of gift-giving: such gifts befit those of the netherworld. With the realm of the living the dead have nothing to do'* (in *Dining and Death*, ed. by C.M. Draycott and M. Stamatopoulou, forthcoming).

Lately, however, there has been some rethinking of the matter. In the first place, it is clear that scholars operating in other areas of the ancient world, such as ancient Egypt and the Near East are not so keen to dismiss eschatological meanings. In ancient Egypt plentiful inscriptions and texts demonstrate fairly standard afterlife beliefs attributable to the classes that built monumental tombs – tombs often incorporating images of eating and drinking. Rather than the reclining banquet of later on, these were more often images of figures seated before a table of offerings or, especially in New Kingdom Egypt, depictions of large feasts that may be in memory of the dead. Perhaps not all (or even any) ancient Egyptians actually believed the dogma about the afterlife, but as Egyptologists such as Gay Robins of Emory University argue, it would still be difficult to see the images in a purely 'secular' light.

A relatively recent find which was big news in the world of Neo-Hittite studies was the Katumuwa Stele, found at the site of Zincirli in 2008. Rather like Egyptian offering-table scenes, here too a figure was shown seated before a table of food. The iconography was not so surprising in itself – other similar images of single figures or couples shown eating and drinking were known before – but this stele carried a long Aramaic inscription that prescribed mortuary food offerings to be left for the deceased. Furthermore, the inscription spoke of the 'soul', or *nfš*, of the deceased residing in the stele itself. Although again it is not possible to state outright that the image shows the deceased in the afterlife, receiving his offerings (the food shown and that listed in the inscription differ), it is difficult to see the relief sculpture purely as an image of social success, unrelated to the ideas about death expressed in the accompanying text.

In some areas of the Classical Mediterranean, such as Etruria, there are images of banquets that specifically locate them in the underworld, showing Hades and/or long-deceased family members, whom the recently deceased join for the meal. Even there, one could argue that the picture is somehow metaphorical rather than evidence of afterlife beliefs, but would that be right or would it actually be a willful imposition, based on an unacknowledged rationalist mindset? What does this mean for the way we should think about the meanings of the Greek *Totenmahl* reliefs, or banquet images from further afield, such as tomb paintings of Han period China, where the depictions and texts can be even less clear? The lessons of scholars such as Dentzer and Fabricius are salutary – one should not read beliefs into the images – but it is also true that one cannot positively determine their absence.

Nor, perhaps, should one divorce from the images ideas about death. In her book *The Roman Banquet*, Katherine Dunbabin shows that while inscriptions can echo that of the above-mentioned one from Astypalaia, they are not always clear about the afterlife. More recently scholars have been pointing out further examples of mixed messages and discussions have arisen about how the use of

such images in places of burial could have encouraged imaginative associations between the banquet theme, the act of reclining, the idea of death and eternal repose. Art, whether visual or verbal, is never fixed; it always has the capacity to stimulate the imagination. Some studies of ambiguity and art have even suggested that the greater this capacity, the greater the art.
Although some can certainly be described as masterpieces of their day, many of the sculptures and paintings that decorated tombs in the past were not 'high art'. Even so, the success of the *Totenmahl* image type, and other images of food and drink consumption in funerary art through the ages, may be partly due to their capacity to prompt various ideas in the minds of viewers. Such images then are not so easily unpacked as direct representations of the deceased's social identity, but may have appealed to the living who erected the monuments in part because of their more indefinite aspects.

• Catherine M Draycott is co-editor of *Dining and Death. Interdisciplinary perspectives on the 'funerary banquet' in ancient art, burial and belief*, which will be published by Peeters Press later this year.